

My Issues with the Construction of History by Siobhan McKissic

In this technological age, people are constantly blurring the lines between fact, fiction, history, and myth. With the advent of blogs, twitter, Facebook, Youtube, and a wide array of other outlets, history is instantly recorded as it happens. What occurs is something that has not been able to happen thousands of years: the creation of intersecting and opposing historical narratives. After all, history is just a story from one point of view, but with the Internet, anyone with access to a computer, or even a smart phone, has the ability to be a part of this new creation of history. Although this has not stopped most people from believing one history as the absolute, I often wonder if people are left with a bit too much reign in their creation of history.

When watching the movie “The Watermelon Woman” and reading Zami, I was constantly confronted with the issue of trying to figure out what was truth and what was fiction. It’s easy to follow in the footsteps of David Sedaris and say, “it’s true enough,” but there is something very unsettling about not knowing what is “real.” More importantly there’s something unsettling about actively believing in a lie. After watching “The Watermelon Woman,” I keep feeling as though the main focus of the movie, Faye, is a real person even though I am very aware of the lie. If Dunye’s point was to convince her audience of an absolute and then tell them that truth is a lie, then she succeeded. It teaches us a valuable lesson about what we are taught and what we believe despite ourselves.

Her later statement about creating our own histories is important to the psyche of the black American community. Our history has been written for us and it has been presented as an absolute. To rewrite that history is to empower ourselves, but to knowingly lie feels like a slight injustice to the cause.

When I am concerned about the portrayal of a black history I turn often to art. An artist I believe blurs the lines between history and myth is Kara Walker. She is known for her silhouettes of pre-Civil war life and uses this time and this medium to capture the relationship between slaves and slave masters. Her images are fantastical. They are both truth and fiction. It is often difficult to tell where the bodies separate from each other and from where their relationship are born. It’s beautiful and frightening and enchanting. If you can’t tell, I love her work. I also believe that her artwork, and the realm of art generally, is a good place for these kinds of conversations about the creation of history.

There is something about art that allows for the existence of many universal truths without any of them being questioned. I think this is possible because art has the ability to get around two main issues associated with the creation of history: time and ambiguity. Why is time an issue? Time conceals sources. All the myths we believe are cloaked behind the curtain of time. Because we can’t see an alternative and we can’t see how or when it was created, it will continue to be. Why ambiguity? Art is allowed to be ambiguous; fact is not.

I suppose my real issue with the created history is that while showing the flaws in the creation of history, it also reveals flaws in its own creation. Despite all my ranting, I do appreciate the idea of creating a history that better reflects what I believe and see in my own life. In fact, I can even think of moments in history when I created my own history. (I went through a stage in high school in which I colored

Disney Princesses Black and Puerto Rican just so I could see myself in the stories. I called it the beginning of a revolution for a Black Disney Princess.) There's something beautiful about creating one's own image, but I think it's important to also present the work as a creation at the start. It all comes down to which is more important: the image or the "truth"? Despite myself I must say the image.

I am conflicted.

(Below you can find a few of Kara Walker's images.)



